Only Fizz

A second-person transformation story

> *Contains adult language and crude humor, in keeping with the character.*
> *Helluva Boss and Fizzarolli are the creation of Vivienne Medrano / SpindleHorse.*

One — The Man Who Was Already Behind You

The evening is doing nothing to you.

That's the part you'd want to remember, if remembering were still a thing you were going to be allowed to do. The evening is ordinary. It is the specific, unphotographable ordinary of a Thursday: fluorescent light buzzing over a crosswalk, a bag of groceries pulling at the crook of your elbow, your phone at twelve percent, a fridge back home that is currently thinking about all the ways it could disappoint you.

You are, by your own accounting, nobody special. You like your coffee terrible and your opinions reasonable. You do not believe in ghosts, aliens, astrology, manifestation, or the man at the gas station who claims the lottery numbers come to him in dreams. You believe in rent. You believe in the bus schedule. You believe in the sacred right of a stranger not to be spoken to.

Then the back of your neck goes cold.

Not the weather cold. The other one. The kind that means *someone is looking at you and is not being polite about it.*

You turn around, and there's a man standing behind you.

He is standing much too close. Six-foot-four, maybe six-five — tall enough that you have to lift your chin. His coat has no seams you can find, no wrinkles that make sense. His face is symmetrical the way a mask is symmetrical. Not wrong, exactly. Just *arranged.* His teeth are not too many and not too few, and his smile is so pleasant it makes your stomach go soft and stupid with alarm.

He smells like the air right after a fuse blows.

"There you are," he says, warmly, the way you'd greet a dog you were fond of. "Oh, don't make that face. I'm not going to hurt you. Hurt is for people who don't get finished. I'm here to *finish* you."

You say something. Probably "Do I know you?" or "Sorry, I'm—" — something small and polite, because that's what you are. You step back. You shift your grocery bag to the other arm like that's a plan.

"Know me?" He tilts his head, and the tilt goes a few degrees further than a neck should allow, and then it comes back, and you decide you imagined it. "No. Nobody knows me. That's rather the arrangement." He

looks you up and down, and the looking feels like being weighed in a hand. "You've been half-finished your whole life, haven't you. Look at all that empty space. All that room."

"I'm not interested," you tell him. "Whatever this is."

"That's what makes it fun." He spreads his hands. "I've done this nine thousand, four hundred and eleven times this century. Twelve hundred and six of them this year alone. It's not a boast, it's a hobby. I find somebody with space in them — and I fill it in." His smile widens by one small, definite degree. "You've been chosen. Which is luckier than it sounds, though I admit the bar is on the floor."

You decide, firmly, that this is a dream.

You have decided that before. It's the standard human move: a stranger says something impossible, and you reach for the nearest exit, and the nearest exit is *this isn't real, I'm asleep, my alarm will go in a minute.* You even do the little pinch of your own palm, and the pinch works perfectly, and that is the worst thing that has happened to you all year.

Then he lifts his hand and you come off the pavement.

Not by the collar. Not by the arm. There's nothing on you. You simply rise half a foot, and the grocery bag slips off your wrist and hits the sidewalk, and a can of something rolls off the curb and into the gutter and keeps going, and you think, with a clarity that will not survive the next four minutes, *that was my dinner.*

"Put me down," you say. Your voice has gone thin. "Please. Please put me down—"

"Oh, we're past *down.*" He steps closer, and he takes your shoulders, and his grip is gentle — absurdly, insultingly gentle, the grip of a tailor fitting a jacket. "Steady. This is the fun part. I promise you won't feel a single thing. You never do."

You want to scream. You want to run. Your body has stopped taking requests.

Then he looks at you, properly, and his eyes open up like two doors.

Two — The Outside, First

There's no pain. There's no *light,* either, not the way you'd expect, no boom, no choir. There's just the color of those eyes, going around and around like a coin on a table, and a warmth that starts at the back of your skull and spreads down through you like water finding a slope.

Ah. There it is. That's nice, actually. That's — oh, that's *really* nice.

The fog comes in soft. Somebody's turned the radio down in the back of your head, and then somebody's turned it off, and then the room where the radio used to be is being emptied of furniture. Your name goes loose and drifts off. Your worry goes with it. Your plans for the rest of the evening go last of all, the sad dinner, the laundry, the call you were going to make and never do.

You smile. You can't help it. It's such a comfortable fuzziness, this — like being a kid in the back seat of a car at night with the heater on.

You cannot move your arms. You cannot move your legs, or your torso, or your head, and you find that you have no opinion about that whatsoever. You can only look. So you look, blankly, comfortably, straight into the spinning coin of his eyes, and you smile like a well-fed animal.

"Good," says the tall man, adjusting his grip so you don't tip. "Now. Easy part first — the outside. Don't think about it. You couldn't if you tried."

He talks while he works. You listen the way a wall listens.

"Down you come," he says, and the world rises around you. The curb swells. The gutter becomes a canyon. Your shopping bag, on the pavement, doubles in size, and then your eyes come level with the top of a fire hydrant. "Five foot nine. Five foot six. Mm — no, still too tall for a jester. Five foot *three.* There. Perfect. Small enough to be underestimated, pretty enough to be forgiven for it."

Something in your chest is going, *this is real, this is real,* very quietly, from a locked room, and then the fog leans on the door and the room goes silent.

"Let's take the years off," he says. "You barely used the last few anyway." Something unclenches in your knee, the old ache that had lived there since you were twenty-two and stupid on a skateboard. Your shoulder does the same, a few seconds behind. "You won't miss that. Nobody ever does."

Your hair goes next, unwinding from your scalp like thread pulled from a hem. You watch a little of it drift past your face, and it doesn't bother you. Nothing does.

"You never liked your hair," the man says. "You never liked your ears either. Cute, in a mammal sort of way. Not what we're doing." And your ears are gone, sealed into the sides of your head — and your nose narrows, and your nostrils close over, and you find, dreamily, that you're breathing anyway, that breathing has become a thing your body simply does, like a polite courtesy. Your jaw pushes forward into a short, blunt, reptilian muzzle. Your teeth sharpen along the edges, all at once, with a sound like a drawer of cutlery closing.

"There," he says, pleased. "Now the colors. Red. Obviously red — it's the best color, ask anyone down here. And a *bit* of the past, so you remember it without having to try." Your skin goes crimson and warm. Something spreads up your face and down across your scalp, a burn that doesn't burn, a scar laid on like a signature — you feel it as pressure, as heat that has already happened to somebody and is now politely being shared with you. Only the tip of your mouth and a small patch at the back of your head stay red. He looks at his work for a second longer than he needs to, and something in his face almost becomes respect. "That one's a gift. You'll be ashamed of it and it'll be the most interesting thing about you."

Your horns come last, or what's left of them — two low, blunt, cauterized stubs where something enormous used to be, and you can feel the absence of them, the way you can feel a phantom step at the top of a staircase.

"Eyes," he says.

Your eyes change. The whites go lime, the irises go pink, and the whole street sharpens, every light bleeding soft and low and *wrong,* and you watch it happen in the shine of a shop window and smile wider.

"Tongue," he says. It splits. You taste the air with both halves. There are stripes on it. You don't know how you know that. Somewhere behind you, at the base of your spine, something pushes out and unrolls with a soft *snick* — long, black-striped, devil-thin, with one white stripe right in the middle, and it sways, entirely on its own, and then, because it is *yours,* it curls up and taps you on the shoulder like a friend.

"Your arms," the man says, and his voice changes slightly, because this is the part he likes best. "This is the good bit."

Your gloves go first, and then your hands underneath. The skin turns black and white in bands, and the bones inside — the bones go *out,* replaced with something that telescopes, something with ball joints and cold little servos, and your knuckles prick with pale blue dots, one each, neat as buttons. It doesn't hurt. Your arm simply gets *longer,* unfolding to a length that would have torn a human shoulder apart, and then folds back up into itself like a tape measure until it hangs noodle-thin and harmless at your side. At each shoulder there's a light blue circle now, set into the joint. It's warm.

"Go on," he says, and lifts one of your arms with two fingers, and bends it at a place where a human has no joint, and then at another. "You can fold these up, pop them out, thread them through a vent, wave them like a flag. These will lift a car. A *big* car. You'll do it in front of a crowd someday and they'll scream and you'll bow." He does your legs the same way, ankles, knees, heels that end in black shoes with yellow hearts on the toes. "And they'll never get tired. Isn't that a laugh. Everybody down here would give a lung for what I'm putting on you for free."

"Now then." He straightens. "Dress the part."

Everything you were wearing comes apart into thread and light and knits itself back together in a different order. A jester's cap settles onto your bare head, and the bells along its horns of fabric — bright red and bright blue, in a pattern that's wrong on one side and wrong on the other, like a memory of something crooked — ring once, cheerfully, when it lands. A white ruff swallows your neck. Below it, a black collar with its own two small bells. Your front is bright red with yellow trim at the hem and yellow hearts along it; you can't see your back, but you know it's blue against white trim and black hearts, and you could not tell anyone why you know. White and purple stripes run down both legs. Yellow balls sit on your shoulders with little light red hearts on them. Black gloves with

red spots at the knuckles, yellow cuffs, all of it fitting like skin, like it has always fitted.

He takes a step back and turns you, gently, by the shoulders, toward the shop window.

"There," he says. "Look at what you were supposed to be."

You look.

A jester looks back. Five foot three of him, red-skinned and burnt, neon-toothed and lime-eyed, thin-armed and striped and ridiculous, bells swinging, tail curling behind him in a slow happy question mark. You have never seen him before in your life. Your foggy, comfortable, emptied-out mind has no opinion about that at all, and you smile at him in the glass, and he smiles back, and the both of you look like something that has just been told a wonderful joke.

Three — The Inside, After

"Now say something," the man says.

You open your mouth. Out comes a voice like a door hinge with a showtune in it — high, fast, a little gravelly, a voice built to cut through a hundred people shouting at a bar.

"I—" You blink, slowly. "That's not—"

"It is now." He puts his hand flat on your forehead, and you'd swear he doesn't press at all, and yet something gives, like a lid. "Last part. The part that matters. Listen to me, jester, and repeat what you can."

"You were born in Hell," he says.

"Born in Hell," you hear yourself say, in that stranger's voice, comfortably, like a schoolchild who likes the teacher.

"You're an imp. Hellborn. Not a sinner, not a tourist, not some little ghost with a story about how you used to be somebody. Born there. Never anything else. Not for one single second of your life."

The words go in and settle the way furniture settles into a room that has been waiting for it. "Never anything else," you say. "Born there. Always."

"You grew up in a circus tent that smelled like sawdust and cheap fireworks and other people's sweat. You had a father who sold tickets and called it love."

"Sawdust," you say, and your nose wrinkles, pleased. "*Fireworks.*"

"You could juggle before you could spell it. You learned it from a man who never once said *well done,* and you learned to be funny because a laugh was the only money you were ever given, and nobody ever takes a laugh away from you. Nobody can."

"Nobody can." You giggle — actually giggle, a real one, bells jingling as your head moves.

"You had a best friend," he says. "His name was Blitzo."

"Blitzo." The word comes out and something in your throat goes tight around it, under the scarf, under the ruff, in the scar tissue. Your eyes sting. You don't know why. "Blitzo. Yeah. He's—" and then the fog smooths it over like a hand over a bedsheet. "Yeah."

"There was a fire," the man says.

Your body does something complicated then. There's no pain, no memory, no picture — just a flinch in your ruined face, a tightening around the eyes, both halves of your tongue going still. "Mm," you say. "Don't."

"I won't." He sounds genuinely kind. "You don't have to. It's already in you, that's all. It's the thing you carry. It's why you're careful with sharp objects and why you hate the sight of blood and why you're a little bit frightened of crowds even when they're screaming your name. *Especially* when they're screaming your name."

"Sure," you say, dreamily. "Sure, that's—"

"You are a clown," he says. "*The* clown. Ten years running. The best one on the whole damn stage."

"The best," you say. "Ten years running." And it's true. It's the truest thing you've ever said, and it has never once been said by the person whose throat is saying it.

"You work at Ozzie's. You're the host. You're the star. You walk out under that light and the room goes *feral.*"

"Ozzie's," you say, and your whole face lights up. "Yeah. *Ozzie's.*"

"You're Asmodeus's boyfriend."

Something enormous and wrong and completely correct happens in your chest. "*Ozzie's* boy," you say, and then, dreamily, warmly, correcting him: "I'm Ozzie's boy. He loves me. Not like a fan. Like a person." A pause. Your tail curls tighter. "He thinks I'm funny."

"He does," the man says. "He thinks you're the funniest thing that ever crawled out of a circus. He'd tell you so, except he'd get distracted halfway through."

You snort. It's a filthy little sound, out of a stranger's nose, and it fits you better than anything has fit you all evening.

"And you're funny," the man goes on, "in the way that makes decent people cover their drinks. Fast. Vile. You've got a mouth like a drain and you'd rather die than be sincere for more than four seconds—"

"Funny as *fuck,*" you say happily, and the word comes out with a little pop of delight, a word you have never once used, a word that now fits your mouth like it was measured for it. The tall man laughs — an actual laugh, surprised out of him, the first honest sound he's made all night.

"There he is," he says.

He takes your face in both hands, gently, tilting it up. His thumbs rest against the burn.

"Almost nothing left of you," he says, softly. "Forget him. Let him fade out of your mind. There's a boy in there with a grocery bag and a bad knee, and he's already mostly a rumor, and I'd like him gone entirely. Let him fade. Be a good lad and let him go."

"Guhuh," you say, and your smile is mindless now, wide and slack and utterly content, "yeah..."

"Because there is only *you* now." His eyes hold yours. "Only Fizz."

"Only," you say, in your bright gravel voice, "only Fizz..." — and it isn't obedience anymore, not exactly, it's *agreement,* because of course there's only Fizz, there's always been only Fizz, that's the funniest part of the entire joke.

The man lets out a long, satisfied breath and lets go of your face.

"Good boy."

Then everything goes out.

Four — The World Catches Up

The night folds.

It doesn't shatter, or burst, or catch fire — it *folds,* neatly, along lines that were always there, and the city goes with it. The buildings stop having depth. They flatten, one by one, like paper lanterns settling, and every surface grows a clean black edge around it, an outline, as though a very confident hand were tracing the world in ink while you watched. The crosswalk loses its texture and becomes four flat stripes. The streetlight becomes a circle of yellow with a line through it. Your own shadow goes hard and solid and stays exactly where it's drawn.

The sky rolls over from sodium-orange city to something else — a red so deep it's nearly wet, with pink in it, moving slow, like the inside of a mouth. Somewhere very far away, a billboard switches. It used to say MOTEL and now it says OZZIE'S in letters a mile high, and under that, in a smaller type, a name in lights.

Anybody still watching the sidewalk would see a jester with a striped tail, standing very still with his eyes shut, bells quiet, teeth showing in a smile he doesn't know he's wearing. And then they'd blink, and there'd be a dressing room instead.

It smells like greasepaint, gunpowder, hot bulbs, and about nine different kinds of perfume.

Somewhere out there, a crowd is laughing at something. Behind a curtain, a bass line is doing its warm-up thump. A cigarette is burning in an ashtray nobody's supposed to be using.

And in this world that has just been built around him, nobody has ever heard of a cartoon called *Helluva Boss.* Not the imps, not the sins, not the

thing in the alley. There's no such show. There's only the place, and the smoke, and the show going on.

It's Thursday. It's just Thursday.

Five — Bells and Mirrors

You jerk awake in a chair with your bells ringing.

"Wh— *hah!*" You sit up fast, tail snapping straight, and then you wince at yourself. "Ohh, *fuck* me sideways, I fell asleep sitting up again. Nngh. That's the third time this month." You rub your face with a glove and the glove comes away with a smear of black on the fingertips.

The dressing room is exactly as you left it, which is reassuring, because a minute ago you weren't entirely sure you had. Bulbs around the mirror, three quarters of them working. Bouquet somebody sent, dying beautifully. Airhorn on the table, then another airhorn, because you own six and you know where four of them are. Your name on the door — no, on the card in the frame next to the door, because they take the card out when the next act uses the room, and yours gets put back in, and you like watching them put it back in.

You check yourself, because that's a thing you do, and you'd be embarrassed if anyone saw you do it.

Hat. Bells. Asymmetrical stripes, crooked on one side, crooked the other way on the other. You tug the brim down and it settles with a jingle. Ruff — white, intact, not a stitch out of place. Collar, two bells, both ringing when you turn your head. Gloves, red spots, yellow cuffs. Pants, stripes, no stains. Shoes, hearts facing out the way they're supposed to. "Okay," you mutter. "Good. Great. Cool."

Then the mirror. Burn scar, lime and pink, blue teeth, no hair, nothing where ears used to be. You pull a face at yourself, both eyebrows up, tongue out in two halves, and it's a good face, it's a *hell* of a face. The scar doesn't bother you. The scar's been bothering you for fifteen years and it isn't going anywhere and you have made your peace with it on eleven separate occasions. "Yeah," you tell him. "That's me. Hi, handsome."

Then, because you are who you are, and because the thought wanders in uninvited every time you wake up too fast, you check the *important* thing.

Your tail lifts. Curls. Flicks the end of it against the lampshade, *tink.* Reaches out, deliberate as a hand, and picks up a makeup brush off the table — holds it, twirls it, sets it down. Then it stretches up, up, all the way to the pipe running across the ceiling above the mirror, and it hooks on, and it *holds,* and you let it take your whole weight, and you hang there for a second with your shoes off the floor, swinging gently, bells ringing, grinning at yourself upside down in the glass.

"Ha! Still got it." You drop back down, shoes click, tail uncoils and settles. "Still got it. Not a dream. Not going anywhere." You rub your thumb over the shoulder joint, the light blue circle, warm as always, and

you laugh at yourself for the flutter of relief that goes through you. "Fuckin' idiot. You'd know if you were somebody else. You'd *know.*"

You don't remember the dream. There was a street in it. That's all you've got — a street, some light, and a feeling like being weighed. It doesn't matter. Dreams about streets are the most boring dreams a person can have.

What you remember is this: you went off after the second set, sweating through the stripes, and you came in here to change your gloves and instead you sat down for one second, *one,* just to get the bells out of your ears, and then you were gone. And now there's a crowd out front with a bar tab and a grudge and a whole evening of decisions to make, and you're due back under that light in — you check the clock and swear again, cheerfully, at length, with real craft.

"Okay. Okay! Up." You're already moving, snatching the good airhorn, the one that sounds like a dying goose, because the crowd *loves* the dying goose. "Fall asleep before a set. *Before* a set. Fifteen years in this building and I do this. Ozzie's gonna—"

The door opens.

The room gets smaller. That's the thing nobody warns you about — not that he's fifteen feet tall, which he is, but that a fifteen-foot-tall sin walking into a small dressing room makes the *dressing room* feel like it's the one being crowded. Blue flame moves where hair should be, slow, unhurried. He has to duck, and then duck further, and then give up on dignity entirely and lean.

"There he is," Asmodeus says, and his voice is like a bass drum in a cellar two floors down. "My *little joker.*"

"Ozzie!" Your voice goes up at the end of it, always does, and you turn with your arms already open. "Hey —

He picks you up.

He does it with one hand, one arm, scooping you up under the arms like a cat that has opinions, and then he has you at eye level, three feet of air under your heels, and your tail curls around his wrist by pure reflex because you know exactly which wrist.

"You were asleep," he says. "I watched you fall asleep. On the monitor. You went *bonk* against the mirror."

"I was *resting my eyes.*"

"You snored, Fizzie."

"I *breathed* with personality," you say, delighted, scandalized, kicking once. "Put me down, you enormous blue *bastard,* I have a show—"

"Mm." He doesn't put you down. He turns you a little, inspecting, and his voice drops into something that's half growl and half absolute mush. "Look at you. All done up. Bells on and everything." His thumb finds the spot under your jaw, the unscarred bit, and you embarrass yourself by

going slightly cross-eyed. "Ten years running and you still get dressed like it's the first night."

"I *am* the first night," you say. "Every night's the first night. That's the whole trick, big guy, they pay me for the *illusion*—"

"They don't pay you for anything. I do."

"Then pay me *more,*" you say, and he laughs, and the laugh is so big it rattles the airhorn on the table, and he pulls you in against the blue flame of his chest and holds you there, careful, the way he's careful.

For a moment, held, with a bell still ringing somewhere in your hat, you get that feeling — the one you don't have a word for. Not fear. Not quite. A soft little *thud* of something, like remembering a dream you're already forgetting.

"Hey," you mumble into his collar. "Ozzie. Weird question."

"Anything."

"You ever wake up and feel like you were — I dunno. Somewhere else?" You wave a limp glove vaguely. "Like you were somebody for a second. And then you're you again and it's fine, it's great, but for a second it was —" You screw your face up, hunting for it, and it's already gone, the way a word goes when you look at it too long. "Nah. Forget it. Nothing. Stupid."

"It's not stupid," Asmodeus says, quietly, and his hand closes around your whole back. "You're allowed to wake up weird, Fizzie."

"*Fizzie Frog,*" you correct him, smug.

"*Fizzie Frog,*" he agrees.

"Right." You squirm until he sets you down, and your heels hit the carpet, and you straighten your hat, and you check your tail, and everything is where it's supposed to be. "Okay. Out. I got a *show* to do, and you—" you point at him, "—are not allowed to stand in the wings and do the thing with your face. People pay for *me.*"

"The thing with my face is the *draw,*" he says, and follows you out anyway.

The corridor beyond the door is all red velvet and bad decisions. Somebody's warming up a horn section. Somebody else is arguing with a lock. The house lights are down to the glow, and beyond the curtain, three thousand mouths are making a sound like weather.

You stop at the edge of the light, because you always stop at the edge of the light. Bells settling. Tail lifting. Grin already there, all teeth and worse intentions.

Somewhere behind your eyes, a street folds itself away and forgets it ever existed. There's nothing left in you that could remember a grocery bag, or a bad knee, or a bus schedule, or a name that once belonged to somebody with very reasonable opinions. That door didn't just close. It was never a door.

"Ladies and gentlemen and whatever the *fuck* the rest of you are," you say, to nobody yet, just to hear it, "your boy is *back* — and he's smaller, meaner, and forty percent more fuckable than advertised."

The crowd roars before you even move, and that's the thing about being famous: they always roar, and it never, ever stops feeling like a gift.

You go out into the light.

It's Thursday. It's just another day at Ozzie's.

It's the only one you've ever had.